

# The Quest for Immortality

## Treasures of Ancient Egypt



National Gallery of Art,  
Washington



1 Sphinx of Thutmose III, 1479 – 1425 BC, granodiorite; 13 x 8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 24<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. From Karnak; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

- From earliest times the ancient Egyptians denied the physical impermanence of life. They formulated a remarkably complex set of religious beliefs and funneled vast material resources into the quest for immortality. While Egyptian civilization underwent many cultural changes over the course of its nearly three-thousand-year history, the pursuit of life after death endured. This exhibition focuses on the understanding of the after-life in the period from the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC) through the Late Period (664–332 BC). The New Kingdom marked the beginning of an era of great wealth, power, and stability for Egypt and was accompanied by a burst of cultural activity. Much of the activity was devoted to the quest for eternal life and was focused in the capital Thebes (modern-day Luxor), located along the banks of the Nile in Upper Egypt. The works of art on display in these galleries—statues, jewelry, painted coffins, and other furnishings for the tomb—are evidence of this pursuit. They have been lent for this exhibition by the Egyptian government and come from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Luxor Museum of Ancient Art, and the site of Deir el-Bahari.

---

## Kingship and Religion

---

cover Goddess Maat, c. 800–700 BC, lapis lazuli and gold; 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 1 x 1 in. From Khartoum; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

In ancient Egypt, religion and politics were inextricably linked. Egyptian kingship was associated with solar power, which may be understood as an attempt to immortalize the royal office. A sphinx representing the likeness of the pharaoh Thutmose III (1479 – 1425 BC) visualizes this

connection, for the sphinx was a symbolic manifestation of the sun god Re (fig. 1). The sphinx's links to the sun were owed, in part, to the fact that lions in ancient Egypt inhabited the desert margins and were believed to be guardians of the horizon, and therefore of the sun.

The bond between the sun and the pharaoh is an idea almost as old as Egypt itself. The Great Pyramids of Giza, built some forty-five hundred years ago, are themselves symbols of the sun, representative not only of its rays as they hit the earth but also of a sacred pyramidal stone in Re's temple in Heliopolis. By the time of the New Kingdom, pharaohs were no longer buried in monumental pyramids, but rather in elaborate tombs beneath a pyramidal-shaped mountain at a site in western Thebes. Known today as the Valley of the Kings, this desert valley on the west bank of the Nile was the royal burial ground for more than six hundred years, until the Twenty-first Dynasty (1069–945 BC), when the Tanis temple complex in the north of Egypt became the new site for royal tombs. Notwithstanding the relocation of the royal tombs to the north (a result of political upheaval in Egypt), the pharaoh's solar associations persisted. The royal tombs at Tanis, found

2 Funerary mask of Wenudjebauendjed, 1039–991 BC, gold; 8 x 7 x 6 in. From Tanis; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo





3 Pectoral of Psusennes I, 1039–991 BC, gold and semiprecious stones; 23<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 5<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 9<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. From Tanis; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

intact in 1939, represent the most important archaeological find since the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in the Valley of the Kings in 1922–23. However, because the excavation occurred at the outset of World War II, it went largely ignored by the Western public. Objects found in the Tanis tombs, including a gold mask and jewelry (figs. 2, 3), are represented in this exhibition.

Egyptian religion, as well as the authority of the king, rested on the concept of *maat*, translated as “truth,” “justice,” or “natural order.” *Maat* was personified as a goddess with a feather on her head (cover), or sometimes seen simply as the hieroglyphic “feather of truth.” The order instilled by *maat* governed the universe, causing the sun to rise and set every day, the Nile to flood its banks and deposit new layers of nourishing soil every year, and the dead to be reborn in the next world. Egyptian religion, in its essence, was an examination of these cycles of death and rebirth.

For the Egyptians, the cycles were not merely guaranteed natural occurrences; the sun did not simply set and rise again twelve hours later undeterred. Rather, the setting sun signaled the death of the sun god Re and his descent into the nocturnal realm of the underworld. There, a host of protective deities helped him overcome a series of dangers that impeded his progress along the path toward rebirth as the rising sun at dawn. Descriptions of the sun god's nightly journey are inscribed on the walls of royal tombs and

on the objects contained within. The inscriptions serve as a guidebook for the pharaoh's own journey toward rejuvenation, as ancient Egyptians believed that in the afterlife kings became one with the sun god, with whom they were reborn at sunrise. Without such assistance, the sun god's resurrection was impossible. The Egyptians, similarly, did not view their own rebirth in the next world as an absolute given; magic, force of will, morality, and obscure knowledge enabled human resurrection. Elaborate rituals and ceremonial objects were thus designed to provide the deceased with the essentials to reach the afterlife.

---

## Mummification and Burial

---

The dangers that the sun god Re faced during his nocturnal voyage were believed to be the same dangers that all Egyptians faced upon death, regardless of class. But if the underworld journey was a perilous one for both the king and his subjects, it also was full of possibility, with the potential for resurrection and immortality at its end. Funerary rituals associated with mummification and burial may be understood as multiple layers of protection, aiding the deceased during the treacherous journey toward afterlife. The body was protected by physical coverings, amulets, and magical deities that together preserved the body and provided the deceased with the knowledge required to achieve resurrection. The protective layers also ensured safety for the *ba*—loosely translated as the soul and personality of the deceased.

The process of mummification, which prevented the body from fully decomposing, functioned as the first protective layer. The deceased's organs were removed from the body, dried in natron salts, wrapped in bandages, and placed in jars with lids depicting guardian deities. The body was similarly desiccated in natron, treated with oils, and then carefully swathed in



4 Statue of Osiris, 664–610 BC, graywacke; 59 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 9 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. From Medinet Habu; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo



5 Osiris Resurrecting, 664–525 BC, gneiss, with a headdress in electrum and gold; 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 7 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 21 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. From Horbeit; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

6 Anthropoid coffin of Paduamen, 1069–945 BC, painted and varnished wood; 77 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 21 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. From Deir el-Bahari; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo



linen. The wrapping of the body associated the deceased with Osiris, the ruler of the netherworld (fig. 4). The myth of Osiris told of his murder and the dismemberment of his body, which was subsequently collected in its parts, wrapped together, and reborn with divine assistance. To be resurrected, a dead Egyptian—commoner or king—needed to imitate the form of Osiris. Once mummified, the deceased was called “Osiris,” and it was expected that he or she then would be reborn in the same magical fashion. An unusual image of this very moment is depicted in a mummiform figure that simultaneously represents Osiris and the deceased in his form (fig. 5). The figure has just rolled over from its back and is becoming alert, lifting up his head, and awakening to new life.

The mummies of royalty and nobles were outfitted in elaborate attire that may have included beaded clothing, jewelry, finger and toe covers, and masks (fig. 2). The dressed body was then placed in its magically protective container, the coffin (fig. 6). Depending upon the deceased’s status and wealth, the coffin may have then been placed into a series of nesting coffins, which, for the privileged, were set in a massive sarcophagus that rested in the tomb’s burial chamber.

---

## Tomb Furnishings

---

Within the tombs, Egyptians placed objects that would assist the deceased in their next life. Many royal tombs contained painted wooden boats such as the one buried with King Amenhotep II (1427–1400 BC; fig. 7). Modeled after royal barges that ferried kings along the Nile in life, such ship models were believed to be the kings' magical transport through the waters of the netherworld. Many of the items discovered in burial chambers were divine objects—statues of gods and goddesses, sacred funerary texts, and beautiful jewelry with religious iconography, such as the pectoral of King Psusennes I (1039–991 BC). Placed over the chest of the deceased, the pectoral depicts goddesses protecting a winged scarab beetle, the symbol of the rising sun (fig. 3). The Egyptians believed that by representing deities in tomb chambers, their divine magic and knowledge would accompany the deceased in the journey toward rebirth.

The afterlife was understood as an actual physical existence requiring sustenance. Tomb furnishings, therefore, included a variety of basic provisions, such as clothing, furniture, toiletries, and offerings of food and drink. These everyday objects in Egyptian tombs inform us as much about ancient life as about the Egyptian understanding of death. The frequent decoration of these functional objects with gods and goddesses and sacred texts, for example, indicates that religion was not a distinct realm, but instead permeated all aspects of Egyptian society. The chair of

**7** Boat from the tomb of Amenhotep II, 1427–1400 BC, painted wood; 19<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 92<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. From Thebes, Valley of the Kings; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo





8 Chair from tomb of Yuya and Tuya, 1390–1352 BC, wood and gold;  $23\frac{5}{8} \times 16\frac{15}{16} \times 15\frac{3}{8}$  in. From Thebes, Valley of the Kings; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

9 *Ushebtis* of Yuya, 1390–1352 BC, painted wood;  $9\frac{13}{16} \times 3\frac{3}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{8}$  in. From Thebes, Valley of the Kings; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo



Sit-Amun, for example, made for the daughter of King Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BC), is adorned with images of the leonine god Bes and the hippopotamus goddess Taweret— domestic deities who protected women and children (fig. 8).

If the afterlife was considered an actual physical place, it was also one where there was real work to be done. Recognizing this need but not wanting deceased pharaohs and nobles to be burdened with such labor, the Egyptians provided servants for the deceased in the form of small statues known as *ushebtis* (fig. 9). Often equipped with tiny hoes and other tools, *ushebtis* were prepared to perform the agricultural and building activities in the underworld. It was not uncommon to find hundreds of these figures in a single burial chamber—as many as one for every day of the year.

---

## Funerary Texts

---

An important component of Egyptian religion is its tradition of funerary literature. The earliest known collection of religious spells, called the



Pyramid Texts, dates to 2350 BC at the time of the Old Kingdom. Over the course of the next centuries, a succession of new funerary texts slowly shaped the course of Egyptian religion. The New Kingdom, however, witnessed an explosion of such funerary texts, collectively referred to as the Books of the Netherworld. More coherent than their predecessors, these books offered the earliest systematic explanation of Egyptian religion. The most important of these texts are popularly known as the Book of the Dead and the Amduat (the latter meaning “that which is in the netherworld”).

Those who could afford it commissioned personalized versions of the Book of the Dead to be inscribed on coffins, sarcophagi, *ushabtis*, and other objects for the tomb. The text contained nearly two hundred magical spells and cryptic knowledge that prepared the deceased for the challenges in the underworld. For example, the coffin of the nobleman Paduamen (fig. 6) includes many texts and vignettes from a spell designed to protect the body. The coffin lid depicts Nut, the sky goddess and mother of the sun god, her wings protectively outstretched on the abdomen of the deceased.

While the Book of the Dead was available to all Egyptians, the Amduat was reserved for the pharaoh and a few select nobles. The earliest known complete copy of the Amduat is found in the tomb of Thutmose III in the Valley of the Kings. The text describes in minute detail the geographical layout of the netherworld and the events that transpire in each of the twelve hours of the sun’s nocturnal journey—believed to be the pharaoh’s journey as well—from sunset and death to sunrise and rebirth. Painted onto the walls of Thutmose III’s burial chamber (fig. 10) in simple, cursive red and black lines that mimic writing on papyrus, the text guides the deceased through the netherworld. Describing its various regions, depicting in images and in hieroglyphic text all of the perils that must be faced, the Amduat provided the knowledge required to pass through unscathed. Hour by hour all deities, demons, and



10 Fourth hour of the Amduat, tomb of Thutmose III, 1479–1425 BC, painted plaster. From Thebes; Valley of the Kings. Photo courtesy of Erik Hornung

enemies are drawn and named, for to know the name of something is to harness its power.

---

## The Realm of the Gods

---

The realm of the afterworld was inhabited by hundreds of gods and goddesses who assisted the deceased in the journey toward resurrection. While Osiris ruled the netherworld (fig. 4), all of the other deities worked together to protect the deceased and to aid in the quest for immortality. The deities were represented as humans, animals, and often both, with many gods taking the form of the inhabitants of the Nile Valley. For instance, the Egyptians worshiped the falcon god Horus, master of the sky and the embodiment of kingship, the crocodile god Sobek, connected with fertility and water, and the lioness goddess Sakhmet, who controlled the fortunes of war and pestilence. The goddess Hathor, believed to be the mother goddess, is represented as a cow or as a woman with cow horns. She is closely linked to another of the most powerful female deities, the goddess Isis, who in fact often wears Hathor's cow horns. Amidst this animal imagery, it is important to remember that what the Egyptians venerated was not the animals themselves but the powers associated with them.

The jackal Anubis, who oversaw embalming and guarded the body, was frequently depicted on funerary objects such as canopic chests—boxes that enclosed the four jars containing the mummy's extracted organs. A sculpted Anubis figure lies on top of the canopic chest seen in this exhibition, clearly marking his territory and domain (fig. 11). His image and power are reinforced by the painted Anubis (here depicted as a human body with a jackal head) rendered on the front of the chest.

Multiple manifestations of individual gods were common, and indicative of the complex nature of Egyptian religion. In the case of Re, as many as seventy-five manifestations are known. A



**11** Canopic chest of Queen Nedjmet, c. 1087–1080 BC, gilded and painted wood; 32 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 19 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 26 in. From Deir el-Bahari; The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

pectoral found in the tomb of Psusennes I in Tanis depicts several of these representations, including a winged sun disk, a motif repeated near the bottom of the pectoral, where a row of red carnelian disks signifying the sun stretches across the width (fig. 3). The sun god is also depicted in the central oval where a lapis-lazuli scarab, the morning manifestation of the sun god, is found. Further solar connections are seen in the use of gold, known generally as the “flesh of the gods,” but with particular ties to the luminous sun. By including these many representations of Re in his tomb, the king associated himself with the sun’s miraculous death and rebirth every day, thus providing himself with the same regenerative and protective powers for his own resurrection. As in many of the objects in this exhibition, the careful craftsmanship, detailed iconography, and rich materials of the pectoral remind us of the supreme importance of the quest for immortality in ancient Egypt.

The exhibition is organized by United Exhibits Group, Copenhagen, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo.

Brochure prepared by the department of exhibition programs and produced by the publishing office.

© 2002 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington